[Mountain Sharecroppers]

February 16, 1939

Jake Mack (white)

Valley Street

Emma, N. C.

Day laborer, sharecropper

Anne Winn Stevens, writer.

Douglas Carter, reviser.

MOUNTAIN SHARECROPPERS Original Names Changed Names

Jake Mack Jake West

“Mother Mack” “Mother West”

Julia Plemmons Julia Simmons

Frank Wells John Arnold

Turkey Creek Duck Creek

Mike Kelly Pat Reilly

Lon Robert's Luther Rance's

Henry Plemmon's Tom Carter's

Captain McDonald Captain Mason

Thomas Edison Mack Thomas West C9 - N.C. Box 1-

MOUNTAIN SHARECROPPERS

From the highway that traverses the village, there diverges at right angles a muddy, red-clay road, a mere gash between low hills. For the sake of identification, the bus drivers call this road Valley Street. It is fringed by dingy, four-room shacks, some of which are surrounded by a few acres of field, whose chief crop seems to be corn. Here and there a bony cow is staked out to graze, or a few chickens of no distinguishable breed scratch in the red mire.

One of these shacks has a curiously pied appearance, because it was originally painted a dark red, and later whitewashed, and now the whitewash, long discolored, has flaked off in patches. Shading the porch are two silver poplars, which seem to have sprung up quite by adcident. From one of these hang sprays of an unpruned rose vine. Here and there through the muddy clay of the yard, clumps of jonquils begin to show green in 2 mid-February. Ragged, sodden cornstalks stand in the few acres of surrounding field. In this unkempt setting live the Wests.

The interior of the house is a shabby as its exterior. Discolored plastering has fallen off in spots. A double bed fills one corner of the living room. The limp curtains are of cerise gauze, over red and yellow window shades. Only one small, faded rug is on the rough floor. At the time of my first visit a multiplicity of calendars surrounded the mantel, and on the opposite wall hung a huge red-cardboard heart, the relic of some grandchild's school work.

On a later visit, I became aware that the calendars and a few prints of Biblical subjects had been winnowed, and neatly distributed with a sense of proportion on the four walls, and

the huge red heart had been pinned inconspicuously under the edge of one of the curtains. Some social worker had certainly improved the appearance of the interior.

To a newcomer, Mrs. West's pious greeting is, “I am always pleased to meet any of the Lawd's people.”

The Wests belong to a generation that in their childhood could be bound out, legally, “Mother West,” 3 as the neighbors now call her, Julia Simmons as she was then know, was bound out at the age of 10 to a well-to-do farmer, John Arnold. Julia was the daughter of a Duck Creek farmer, who, dying, left a wife and six children of whom Julia was the oldest. In the settlement of his property - he owned his farm - the Widow Simmons was left penniless. Unable to support her children, she bound them out to neighboring farmers as soon as they were large enough to work. According to the terms of the contract, Julia was to be sent to school. But although Arnold saw that his own children attended the county schools, Julia was taught neither to read nor to write. She became a general houseworker in the Arnold family.

Jake West, to whom Julia was married at eighteen, had a similar experience. He was a farmer's son from Duck Creek. Orphaned, he was bound out to a farmer of the Leslie section, but he was given a little schooling, so that he learned to read, but not to write. He became a farm laborer until the contract binding him out expired, when he was 18, two years after his marriage to Julia.

The reaction of the Wests to the now obsolete custom 4 of binding children out is interesting.

“Children was allus pervided with homes in those days,” Julia says earnestly. “They wasn't allowed to wander around from place to place and go hungry.” Jake, glancing up from under the brim of his ragged felt hat, which he keeps on indoors, nods agreement.

After their marriage, and the expiration of the contracts which bound them, the Wests drifted to the county seat as unskilled laborers. Julia took in washing. She bore nine children and raised seven of them. The children attended school a few years each, except the youngest daughter, who lives with her parents and earns two dollars a week looking after a neighbor's children.

“She was afflicted,” says Julia, “with white swelling, and was crippled; so she was kept outer school. Her memory is short; so she never learned how to read.”

Meanwhile, Jake worked at various jobs, such as helping to lay water mains and sewer pipes, and opening up streets. Under the employment of Pat Reilly, who had the contract for this work, Jake dug trenches 10 hours a day at a daily wage of 75 cents. Later he was paid $1 a day. “There was,” he says, “no loitering on 5 the job; Reilly stood over us and watched us all the time.”

In 1916, the family left the county seat and became sharecroppers on various farms nearby. “We worked on Lutner Rance's place, and on Tom Carter's farm,” said Jake. “Sharecroppers was allus given the very poorest land. If the owner furnished seed and farm implements, he took half of what was raised. We made a bare living. The owner kep' the best land fur hisself, or rented it out fur cash.”

The crops raised were diversified: corn, potatoes, cabbages, turnips, tomatoes, mustard, and other vegetables. “We allus planted corn on the first dark of the moon in March,” said Julia. “Crops planted on the bright of the moon grows spindling. The corn shoots up tall and goes all to leaves. The ears are stunted. Mustard planted on the bright of the moon goes all to stems. Plant it on the dark of the moon, and it grows low, and bushy, with plenty of leaves.”

The sharecropper could, if he were inclined, raise pigs and chickens on the same terms as the crops. “The work,” said Jake, “was from sunup to sundown.” To aid her family, Julia

took in washing, making from $6 to $8 6 a week. In the flu epidemic of 1918, she made as much as $15 a week[.?] “Everbody was afraid to wash clothes for them that had fly,” she explained. “When I had washed the clothes and hung them out to dry in the mawnin', I would work all afternoon in the field. Sometimes I ironed until 11 o'clock at night.”

A woman of powerful frame and sound health, she after hired out by the day to do farm work, breaking off corn tops and stripping fodder. She boasts: “I could allus do a man's work in the field, and get a man's wages.”

“Yes, she could allus keep up with us men,” her husband added proudly.

For stripping fodder and other field work, the men with whom Julia kept up were paid 50 cents a day. “The women who lagged and couldn't keep up got 25 cents a day.”

The Wests finally gave up sharecropping, after having worked as sharecroppers from 1916, as well as they can remember, until 1929. “We couldn't make a living that way,” said Jake, “the owners wanted to take all and leave the sharecroppers nothing, so I took to peddling. I got a horse and cart and peddled vegetables in the 7 summer, and apples or coal in the winter. When the roads in these parts was paved, I got a truck and kep' on a-peddling.”

The West's eldest son remained at the county seat and ran two rooming houses, both in the business section. He was killed some eight years ago in a drunken quarrel with his wife, who struck him over the head with an iron pipe, so that he fell down a flight of stairs at one of his rooming houses. At first his wife was exonerated, and his death charged to an accident. Later, she confessed fully. Captain Mason, of a welfare organization, says she confessed after having been converted by reading a copy of a religious, periodical. Julia West thinks her confession was due to the sheriff's suspicions and unremitting questioning. At any rate, she was sentenced to serve 20 years in prison for manslaughter.

The youngest son of the Wests, Thomas, joined the Army when he was very young. His mother says, “He was 14 years old, but was large for his years. He drove a car for some captain or other down in Mexico.”

As a matter of Government record, he spent two years in active service, first on the Mexican border, and later for nearly a year in France as an ambulance driver along the Hindenburg Line. He was in three 8 offensives, and shortly before the Armistice was wounded in the hip. Honorably discharged, he returned to his parents. It was his bonus that enabled them to buy from a Negro the shack and the few acres of land where they now live.

Later, he was run over at a railway crossing, being so absorbed in avoiding one train that he did not see the other coming from the opposite direction. He lost a leg thereby.

“The Gov'ment,” says Julia, “giv him a new leg.” He also gets a small pension from the Army, and, according to his mother, “lives near the depot and drives a truck.” Thomas was married to a woman conspicuous for flaming red hair. She deserted him and their 16-month-old, red-haired daughter, Frances. The girl “was raised” by her grandparents. Julia says, “She hates her red hair because it is like her mother's. She wishes she could paint it black. People tell her, because her hair is like her mother's, she will turn out the same way.” This red hair is really the girl's one attractive feature. Frances, now 18 and married to a W.P.A. worker, was reared by her grandparents with the greatest strictness. “Until she was married,” says Julia, “I never let her 9 go anywhere unless her grandpappy or one of her aunts was along. She ain't never been to a moving picter, nor to a dance. She went to church and Sunday school, right faithful.” The Wests' 40-year-old married daughter, who was present, asserted sanctimoniously, “I ain't never been to a moving picter, either.” The girl, Frances, is the mother of a blue-eyed baby whom her grandparents are helping her “to raise.” She lives in one of the drab shacks across Valley Street. Several of the Wests'

married daughters and grandchildren live along Valley Street, also. They are all working on the W.P.A., or dependent on the welfare department.

Julia and Jake raise corn, potatoes, tomatoes, mustard, and other vegetables on their strip of ground. So far as possible, they save seed from one year to the next, so they will not be out of both seed and money when planting time comes. They still plant “on the first dark of the moon in March,” no matter how early or how late that may be. “We allus has the ground plowed in February, so it can be plowed deep, and get mellow,” they say. They keep a cow and chickens, and sell their surplus milk and eggs.

“I caint bring myself to sell milk to sick people,” 10 says Julia. “They can come and get all they want.” Neither can she sell her vegetables. “It don't look right to charge a neighbor for a mess of mustard,” she says.

In spite of their advanced years - they are both in the early seventies - the Wests never call in a doctor. Jake, ruddy and white-haired, still carried himself erect. Weather-beaten and wrinkled as she is, Julia still walks with a firm step. Her scanty, gray hair is drawn back tightly from her large face. She wears loose, ill-fitting cotton dresses. She believes in old-fashioned remedies made of herbs, or of household ingredients. Her remedy for colds is “a stew made of vinegar, butter, molasses, and pepper.” But it has failed to cure her recent bronchitis.

A staunch Baptist, Julia constantly affirms her convictions. “I am an ole woman that has allus stood for the right,” she is fond of repeating. “I allus wanted to be somebody,” she declares. “Even when I didn't have a dress to my back, I wanted to be somebody.” Although she can not agree with the doctrines of “the Holy Rollers over to Duck Creek,” she is tolerant of their “hikey-dykes.” She disapproves strongly of all alcoholic beverages. Jake declares he has never taken a drink. When drunken neighbors wander into their yard swearing, Julia orders them 11 off. “Nobody is goin' to be allowed to insult my Lawd on my premises,” she says. She admits, “My sons drink likker, but I don't sanction it.”

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Some of the family are learning to read. A W.P.A. teacher has gathered four of them, Julia, Jake, and two of their middle-aged daughters, in the West house for lessons twice a week. Although Julia's spectacles are ill fitted, so that her eyes smart when she used them, she is actually learning. “I can read,” she says, “better than I can pronounce.” Her motive for this effort seems to be twofold: affection for the teacher, and a desire “to read the word.”

She and her husband get old-age compensation to the amount of $14 month. They seem to regard it as their due.

Julia sums up their life history [?] by saying, “We have had bad times, but we have had good times, too. I guess the lawd gives me all I need; all I want might not be good for me.”